

Bank on evolution of biofuel

IF you give a moose a muffin, he's going to want jam on it. Then he's going to want another muffin, and another and another. When all the muffins are gone, he's going to want more ...

That's a close rendering of the children's book "If You Give a Moose a Muffin" by Laura Numeroff. It's also the loop that started running through my mind while Mick Henderson, manager of a grower-owned Kentucky ethanol plant, was talking about opposition to ethanol production and use in the U.S.

You see, some of those opposed to ethanol production believe that if corn prices stay high, then we'll produce fewer soybeans in the U.S. If we grow fewer soybeans here, then Brazil will try to make up for that production. To do that, they'll cut down the rainforest. And when the rainforest is gone ...

Most people agree that's an extreme scenario. It makes that kind of thinking less damaging. What is damaging — or perhaps, damning — is the prevailing consensus that growing ethanol takes more energy than it saves as fuel. Not only is that scientifically inaccurate, it's short-sighted, even if it was remotely close to accurate at one time. It's damaging because it's causing dim minds — such as those on the California Air

On My Mind

Regulation Board — to reject ethanol.

Growing corn does take more inputs, from ammonium nitrate to water, than some other crops, and its energy content is less than some other crops that can be used for fuel. What corn is, however, is our first viable commercial ethanol.

We're refining production and processing of corn for ethanol to use less energy and produce more fuel. Everyone who's involved, from seed companies to growers to processors — even our hackneyed automobile manufacturers — is stirring up the think tank, pursuing ways to do it better. In the meantime, we're also researching other possible feedstock for biofuels. Think algae. Think switchgrass, trees, peanuts. Anything with cellulosic material.

The final answer won't be any one of these, but a combination of several.

Some of this thinking was under way in the 1980s when gas prices skyrocketed and we could fill up our cars on alternate days, depending on the last number in our street address. Then prices went down; public interest in gas-ohol waned and government concern

followed, which means research funding dried up and projects shut down.

We're at the crucial point again today. Gas prices aren't terrible, at least compared to last summer. Budgets are squeezed to the last turn of the vise. Debt is high, and something needs to be cut. Those opposed to using biofuels — whether well-meaning but poorly educated environmentalists or greedy petroleum lords — are oiling the political machine for a pullout.

Our pastors talk about being tested when we're on the path of righteousness. It happens in the secular world as well. Don't buy into it.

We will figure out how to do this better. We'll change our way of life a bit, but we'll alleviate dependence on foreign oil, fuel rural economies and be a bit kinder to our environment.

American ingenuity lives on; commit to it.



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Sippin' and Spinnin'
By CD PLAYER

Kids' intelligence pushes envelope

Iam astonished at how smart my grandsons are. I know all grandfathers think their grandchildren are the smartest. What you must understand is, mine really are.

During the drought-busting rain in late March, Mpeg and Ipod were spending the night with LP and me. There was water everywhere. I suggested we go look at the water and see how high it was. Mpeg told me they had been at the farm earlier and saw all the water they wanted. He suggested I go and tell them about it when I returned.

Thinking I could turn this complacency around, I suggested that Granny wanted to see, too. Mpeg suggested I just take a picture to show her. I asked if he had an answer for everything; he assured me he did.

From whence does this level of thought come? Players are not typically considered to be atop the intellectual food chain.

A bit later we were working on Mpeg's spelling words, and Ipod, who is all of 5, started spelling the third-grade bonus words. I asked him if he knew he was smart; he assured me he did. From whence does this come? Mpeg and Ipod are both in classes for gifted children in school. I was accused of everything but being gifted when I was in school.

Less than a week later they were both at the house with their cousin, JBL. At first, I just enjoyed watching them play. When I started listening to them as well, I realized that JBL is following the intellectual path of his two cousins.

LP told me the lady who keeps him is homeschooling her children, and I guess he just gets it by exposure to their lessons. Still, what could have made these little boys so smart?

A sweet young lady who sings in the choir with me is a second-grade teacher at Mpeg's school. Miss B has this really mild manner, this mildly warped sense of humor, and best of all, a love for her students that makes parents send raves about her to the local newspaper. If my second-grade teacher had been like Miss B, I probably never would have gotten to third grade.

For instance, during one choir practice Miss B told me she had seen Mpeg. She said she had helped expand his knowledge base by teaching him the "stanky leg," one of the few popular dance moves that can be shown in church. She proceeded to show me. You stick your leg out and rub your foot around on the ground in kind of a circular but rolling motion that also gets your hips involved.

It reminded me of being at my great-grandparents' farm, young and bare-foot and trying to get something I had stepped in off of my foot.

It was at this point I realized how truly genius our teachers are. How could the students help but be smart?

Born in U.C.L.A. (the Upper Corner of Lower Alabama), Player now lives and loves in Tifton, Ga.

Dept. of Organic Gardening takes off



The Ford Report

By STEVE FORD



OUR new president and secretary of agriculture started the year with policy proposals that showed their lack of understanding of U.S. ag. Since then, they have been busy staffing administrative positions at USDA. Unfortunately, their choices further illustrate their ignorance of farming and the agricultural sector.

Tom Vilsack has staffed his department with a variety of administrators. Only a few have any experience working with ag, and almost none has any direct agricultural experience. Some of those with experience come to USDA from the National Farmers Union, which does not represent mainstream ag interests. Most of the appointees have backgrounds in environmental issues and nutrition.

Vilsack has said this administration will emphasize "sustainability," and his appointments reflect environmental aspects of sustainable agriculture. He has invited noted ag critics like Michael Pollan to meet in Washington, D.C. He has laid plans for an organic garden at USDA headquarters. It will not be a surprise when USDA is changed to DOG (Department of Organic Gardening).

It appears Vilsack has abandoned

commercial agriculture in the U.S. The evidence is clear in his rhetoric and his staffing actions. Certainly there is a need to reduce agriculture's environmental impact, and there are changes in what attributes consumers demand from food. But Vilsack must remember that profitability is also one of the pillars of sustainability. Consequently, the broad-reaching policy change we suspect will arise from USDA needs to be based on accurate, unbiased economic analysis. Right now there is no group in Washington providing that analysis.

Critics of agricultural policy like The Heritage Foundation, The Cato Institute and the Environmental Working Group approach their analyses from an ideological base, incorporating their bias for small government, budget austerity or environmental protection in their work. USDA is part of the executive branch of government, and its economic analysis has always been filtered by the adminis-

tration in power. Commodity organizations do good research, but their work is perceived as biased by association.

Ag policy is coming under attack once again, and it likely will continue to be criticized through the next farm bill debate. We need a think tank in Washington, D.C., that will commit to producing complete, unbiased analysis of current and proposed agricultural policies, and will be a clearinghouse for accurate policy information.

The National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy is such a think tank. Unfortunately, it went largely untended for many years. (For the sake of transparency, I am an unpaid member of the NCFAP board of trustees.)

Three years ago an effort began to rebuild NCFAP, and it is in the process of restaffing with fellows; Stan Johnson is leading the effort. He is former vice provost for Iowa State University Extension, former director of the Center for Ag and Rural Development, and founder of the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute.

Current funding for NCFAP is based on contract work. We need to develop longer-term commitments of support. Producers should encourage their professional organizations and the companies they do business with to support NCFAP now so it can quickly build the critical mass needed to provide accurate agricultural policy analysis. For more on NCFAP, visit www.ncfap.org.

Ford, who farms in north Alabama, earned his doctorate in agricultural and applied economics from the University of Minnesota.